

The Royal Historical Society of Victoria (RHSV) was formed in 1909 and is a community-based membership organisation committed to collecting, researching and sharing an understanding of the history of Victoria. We are the umbrella body for a statewide network of more than 350 historical societies and advocate for the community history sector to government, funding bodies, and the broader public. The RHSV is a not-for-profit organisation whose work spans events, exhibitions, publications, research facilities, and advocacy for the preservation of Victoria's historical record.

Summary

Historical societies are a foundational layer of cultural production in Australia, yet the current National Cultural Policy consultation paper makes no mention of them. Community history organisations preserve irreplaceable local collections, drive heritage tourism in regional communities, and provide meaningful volunteer roles that support the health and wellbeing of older Australians. Further, historical research is a legitimate creative practice which underpins cultural policy. This submission makes six recommendations: that historical societies be explicitly named in the policy framework as cultural infrastructure; that place-based policy be developed to reflect their work; that a coordinated national digitisation strategy be funded at the capacity as well as infrastructure level; that accessible funding pathways be created; that frameworks support historical societies as partners in First Nations cultural heritage work; and that the policy recognise the preventive health value of cultural volunteering for older Australians.

1. Introduction

Our member societies are active across the state, collectively holding millions of items of primary historical material — documents, photographs, oral history recordings, maps, and objects — that form an irreplaceable record of Australian community life.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the development of Australia's next National Cultural Policy and commend the Government on its commitment to consecutive national cultural policies. We write, however, with a clear concern. Local historical societies and the community history sector are absent from the current consultation paper. Any genuine account of Australia's cultural infrastructure must reckon with the distributed network of organisations that preserve, interpret, and share Australia's local histories.

2. A Significant Gap in the Current Framework

The consultation paper does not mention historical societies, community archives, local heritage organisations, or the broader community history sector at any point. The document's treatment of "heritage" is limited to a single reference to national collecting institutions. While we acknowledge the important role of those institutions, this framing overlooks a foundational layer of Australia's cultural infrastructure.

This gap is not merely a matter of nomenclature. It reflects a broader tendency within national cultural policy to privilege contemporary creative production — screen, music, live performance, digital games — over the preservation and interpretation of the cultural record from which those creative industries draw. It is a false dichotomy. A healthy cultural ecosystem requires both the creation of new work and the stewardship of existing memory.

There is a further dimension to this gap. Historical research and historical presentation are creative practices in their own right, and should be recognised as such within the policy framework. The work of identifying, interpreting, and communicating the meaning of the past requires imagination, critical judgement, and narrative skill. Exhibition design, oral history collection, community education programs, local heritage walks, and local histories are all acts of cultural production — they create new knowledge, new perspectives, and new ways of understanding place and identity. Yet this work is excluded from the creative practice frameworks that underpin most cultural funding. The consultation paper's definition of the creative and cultural sector does not extend to historical practice, despite the fact that historical societies are among the most active producers of community-level cultural content in the country. This omission should be corrected, and that historical research and presentation should be explicitly recognised as a form of creative practice within the policy framework.

3. Local History and Sense of Place

Pillar 2 of the proposed policy framework — 'A Place for Every Story' — explicitly commits the Government to recognising "local and place-based practice." We strongly support this commitment. Local historical societies are, in most communities, the primary institutions giving it practical expression.

Historical societies document the lives of everyday Australians in ways that national institutions cannot and do not. They preserve the records of local industries, schools, churches, sporting clubs, families, and communities. They make sense of landscape and place over time — recording not just what a place looks like, but what it has meant to the people who have lived in it across generations. This work is foundational to any genuine account of Australian culture.

In the terms of the consultation paper, local historical societies:

- Foster belonging and community resilience through shared engagement with local memory
- Connect communities to their cultural identity in ways that strengthen civic participation and intergenerational relationships
- Support reconciliation by preserving records relevant to First Nations family and community history, native title, and language recovery
- Animate sense of place — arguably the most direct expression of the 'place for every story' ambition — in communities that large cultural institutions cannot reach

4. The Economic Case for Investing in Community Heritage

The economic argument for supporting local historical societies has been poorly articulated in national cultural policy discussions. This section addresses that directly.

Heritage Tourism

Cultural tourism is one of Australia's most economically significant and fastest-growing visitor segments. Data from Creative Victoria shows that in the year ending December 2024, visitors to Victoria who engaged in cultural experiences spent an estimated \$13.2 billion — representing 32.9% of total tourism expenditure in the state.¹ In that same period, there were 11.5 million cultural visitors to Victoria, with museums and galleries the most popular category, attracting 5.1 million visits.¹ The direct tourism contribution to Victoria's economy reached \$36 billion in 2023-24, a 13% increase on the previous year.²

This dividend is not confined to major institutions or metropolitan areas. Tourism is disproportionately significant in regional Australia, where the sector directly accounts for 6.7% of jobs compared to 2.9% in capital cities.³ Local historical societies are often a primary driver of heritage tourism in regional and rural communities — particularly in towns where historical identity is a core part of the visitor proposition. The Royal Australian Historical Society has noted that in many smaller communities, a local historical society's ability to display material and interpret local heritage is a key factor in supporting local government, tourism organisations and businesses through difficult economic conditions.⁴

The Unquantified Value of Volunteer Labour

The community heritage sector, including historical societies, is almost entirely sustained by volunteer labour. In Victoria, AMaGA Victoria has reported that two-thirds of the collecting organisations in its network of over one thousand institutions are operated entirely by volunteers, collectively caring for approximately ten million objects across the state.⁵ The pattern is consistent nationally: the most recent sector census by Museums & Galleries of NSW (2023) found 58% of respondent heritage organisations in New South Wales operate with no paid staff at all — a proportion substantially higher than comparable sectors in other countries.⁶ This volunteer workforce represents an enormous but largely invisible subsidy to Australia's cultural infrastructure.

The Federation of Australian Historical Societies has observed that local historical and heritage societies operate in virtually every local government area in the country, creating significant social and economic benefits for a remarkably small level of government contribution. When you assess the cost of replacing that labour with paid equivalents — or of recreating collections assembled over generations — the return on public investment is high.

The Cost of Inaction

There is a compelling economic argument for acting now. Collections that are lost whether this is through closure of societies or damage to collections. The material held by local historical societies has been assembled over generations from local donors and cannot be replaced. Once lost or dispersed, the heritage tourism potential, the research value, and the community cultural resource are gone.

Digitisation offers a partial mitigation, but only if undertaken systematically and with adequate resourcing. Collections that are digitised and made accessible via platforms such as Trove and Victorian Collections generate ongoing economic and research value at relatively low marginal cost. Victorian Collections — a free, industry-standard collection management system run jointly by AMaGA Victoria and Museums Victoria — provides a strong state-level model, and the Trove Strategy 2025–2030 commits to expanding community heritage content and growing the number of partner organisations nationally. But the infrastructure alone is not enough. Research consistently identifies that the primary barriers to digitisation for volunteer-managed organisations are not technological but human and financial: limited digital literacy among ageing volunteers, lack of access to equipment, poor connectivity in regional areas, and the absence of sustained on-the-ground support.

We note that the consultation paper cites cultural and creative activity contributing \$67.4 billion to Australia's economy in 2023-24.⁷ The community history sector is not counted systematically within this figure, a further indication of the sector's invisibility in national policy frameworks. Greater recognition and targeted investment could unlock measurable economic returns, particularly across regional Australia.

5. Historical Societies as Cultural Infrastructure

Pillar 4 of the policy framework — 'Strong Cultural Infrastructure' — commits the Government to supporting institutions that "sustain our arts, culture and heritage." The consultation paper identifies national collecting institutions and arts training organisations as the primary focus of this pillar. That framing needs to be broadened.

Local historical societies constitute a distributed national heritage infrastructure. They function, as a community-level collecting network of enormous scale and reach — one that complements, rather than duplicates, the national institutions. Without this network, significant portions of the Australian historical record would simply not be preserved.

This infrastructure is, however, in a precarious position. Most historical societies are run entirely or predominantly by volunteers, operate without secure government funding, and face acute challenges in relation to:

- Collection sustainability: holdings are often stored in substandard conditions, with inadequate resources for conservation, cataloguing, or access
- Digitisation: the Trove platform provides a strong national foundation, and Vic Collections works at a state level, but the capacity of volunteer-managed historical societies to contribute to and benefit from it is constrained by digital literacy gaps, lack of equipment, poor regional connectivity, and the absence

of recurrent funding for on-the-ground support. A coordinated national strategy must address the capacity layer, not only the infrastructure

- Succession and skills: an ageing volunteer base and limited pathways for younger people to engage with community history work poses significant risks to institutional continuity
- Recognition: without formal recognition within policy frameworks, historical societies struggle to access government funding streams, partnership opportunities, or philanthropic support

6. First Nations History and the Role of Historical Societies

The policy's 'First Nations First' pillar rightly centres the cultural rights, priorities, and leadership of First Peoples. Local historical societies play an important — if often unacknowledged — role at the intersection of colonial-era records and First Peoples history.

Society collections frequently contain records of direct significance to First Peoples: frontier-era documents, mission and station records, photographs, and oral history material. Many societies are engaged in active partnerships with First Peoples to provide access to, and appropriate stewardship of, this material. The policy should create frameworks that support and strengthen this work, ensuring that historical societies can act as genuine partners in reconciliation rather than inadvertent gatekeepers.

7. Volunteering, Wellbeing, and an Ageing Population

The community heritage sector is sustained almost entirely by older Australians who volunteer their time, expertise, and in many cases their personal collections. This is not simply a matter of workforce composition. The work of historical societies — careful, sustained, locally embedded — is a good fit for older volunteers in ways that many other cultural activities are not. A cultural policy that takes seriously the social dimensions of participation needs to engage with this.

Research consistently demonstrates that volunteering in later life is associated with significantly better health and wellbeing outcomes. Studies of older Australian volunteers find that civic participation — including in heritage and cultural settings — improves subjective quality of life, reduces social isolation, and supports cognitive engagement.⁸ Comparative international research identifies volunteering in retirement as one of the most effective contributors to healthy ageing.⁹ The evidence base on intergenerational programming further indicates that heritage environments, which naturally bring together older volunteers and younger community members, are productive settings for the kind of social connectedness associated with positive outcomes across age groups.¹⁰

Australia's population is ageing rapidly. The proportion of Australians aged 65 and over is projected to increase substantially over the coming decades, placing growing pressure on health and aged care systems. There is a cultural policy dimension here. Investment in community organisations that provide meaningful volunteer roles

for older Australians is, in part, investment in preventive health. Research into arts and cultural engagement among older Australians finds clear associations between participation and general health and mental wellbeing.¹¹ Broader evidence on arts engagement and health outcomes has been assessed in major international reviews as constituting a significant and underutilised public health resource.¹²

Historical societies are particularly well-placed to deliver these benefits. They offer structured, skilled volunteer roles with clear social purpose — conditions that research on volunteering in later life identifies as especially conducive to wellbeing. They are embedded in local communities and accessible without the barriers associated with more physically demanding or formally structured activities. Older Australians have a strong and longstanding orientation towards arts and cultural participation, and the community heritage sector is among the most direct expressions of this in practice.¹³ A national cultural policy that explicitly recognises and supports this sector is, among other things, investing in the health and social participation of an ageing population.

8. Recommendations

We submit the following recommendations for consideration in the development of Australia's next National Cultural Policy:

Recommendation 1: Explicit Recognition

That the next National Cultural Policy explicitly recognise local and state historical societies as a component of Australia's cultural infrastructure, naming them alongside libraries, museums, and archives in the policy framework.

Recommendation 2: Place-Based Policy

That Pillar 2 ('A Place for Every Story') be developed to articulate clearly what 'place-based practice' means in policy terms, including the work of organisations that preserve and interpret local history as a distinct and valued form of cultural participation.

Recommendation 3: Digitisation Strategy

That the policy commit to developing a coordinated national strategy for the digitisation of community history collections held by historical societies and similar organisations. The strategy should build on existing infrastructure — including the Trove platform and state-level programs such as Victorian Collections. It should also establish recurrent funding for the capacity-building layer that makes these platforms usable: equipment access, digital literacy training, sustained field support, and dedicated coordinator positions for volunteer-managed organisations.

Recommendation 4: Sustainable Funding Pathways

That the policy create or identify accessible funding pathways for community heritage organisations, acknowledging that existing Creative Australia funding mechanisms are not well-suited to the needs or structures of historical societies.

Recommendation 5: First Nations Partnership

That the policy support frameworks enabling historical societies to act as genuine partners in First Nations cultural heritage work, including access to relevant collections, appropriate protocols, and resourcing for collaborative projects.

Recommendation 6: Volunteering and Healthy Ageing

That the policy recognise the health and social wellbeing benefits of cultural volunteering for older Australians, and that investment in community heritage organisations be considered within cross-portfolio frameworks linking cultural policy with preventive health and healthy ageing policy.

9. Conclusion

The Minister's message in the consultation paper observes that the next cultural policy "is the next chapter in a story that stretches back to the first sunrise on our continent." We agree. But stories require memory as well as imagination. The local organisations that hold, preserve, and share Australia's local memories are not peripheral to national cultural life — they are foundational to it.

We urge the Government to bring the community heritage sector into the policy framework as recognised and supported contributors to Australia's cultural life — not as an afterthought, but as part of the foundational layer the policy claims to value. The RHSV would welcome the opportunity to discuss this submission further.

Contact

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Notes

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3 Australian Government, Minister for Trade and Tourism, New data shows a strong rebound for regional tourism (media release), Canberra, 2023. [Available at: trademinister.gov.au/minister/don-farrell/media-release/new-data-shows-strong-rebound-regional-tourism](https://trademinister.gov.au/minister/don-farrell/media-release/new-data-shows-strong-rebound-regional-tourism)

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